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## ABSTRACT

Each culture advances its own inflected narrative rejoinder to the issues that have confronted it from both time immemorial and in recent developmental history. The important aspect of such a process, however, is that "mythic narratives" allow for answers to be advanced to pressing needs that any particular society may consider important. Keeping with an emphasis on myth in current scholarship, the field of rhetoric has advanced knowledge on how myths are promulgated in modern society. Through such mediums as film, mythic narratives are seen as providing powerful answers that attract societal interest. One approach exists that takes advantage of narrative theory in describing myths and how they compare with myths in other cultures. Two mythic narratives enshrined in film exemplify the heuristic value of this approach, the 1994 American filmic retelling of "Wyatt Earp" and a contemporary Indian film version of the Hindu epic, the "Mahabharata" (entitled "Mahabharat"). By examining the implied audience that these popular films project, the insights of narrative theory can be used to unearth the philosophical and normative themes within these mythic narratives that audiences reject, accept, or alter in future mythic discourse. The research in this paper continues this theoretical approach, extending the comparative power of narrative theory by utilizing myths in the description of culture and cultural warrants for audience action or belief. The paper elucidates a methodology grounded in narrative theory and contextualized mythology. It finds that while both of these narratives share a common micromyth of family revenge and regaining of power, the important cultural differences manifest themselves on the macromyth level. (Contains 69 references.) (NKA)

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**Kurukshetra and the O.K. Corral: A Comparative Narrative Analysis of  
*Wyatt Earp* and the *Mahabharat***

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## Kurukshetra and the O.K. Corral: A Comparative Narrative Analysis of *Wyatt Earp* and the *Mahabharat* Introduction

Mythic narratives have the power to captivate and guide a society in its actions and its beliefs. Through these stories, ontology is shaped as well as epistemological commitments in regard to both knowledge and as to what is correct behavior. As Doniger (1999) writes, “myths derive a great deal of their power and endurance from their ability to express a deeply troubling paradox that everyone in the community shares and no one can solve” (p. 5)—in other words, myths propose powerful answers to such exigencies of existence (Rushing, 1985), not *the* final answer to such quandaries. Each culture advances its own inflected narrative rejoinder to the issues that have confronted it from both time immemorial and in recent developmental history. The important aspect of such a process, however, is that *mythic narratives* allow for answers to be advanced to pressing needs any particular society may consider important.

Keeping with such an emphasis on myth in current scholarship, the field of rhetoric has advanced knowledge on how myths are promulgated in modern society. Through such mediums as film, mythic narratives are seen as providing powerful answers that attract much societal interest (Engnell, 1995; Rushing 1986; Rushing & Frentz, 1989; 2000). Much of this work, however, has invoked the theories of C. G. Jung (1971; 1980), the founder of depth and archetypal psychology. While this model has been valuable for a new look at filmic myths, a different approach exists that takes advantages of narrative theory in describing myths and how they compare to myths in other cultures. It is in this comparative spirit that this inquiry attempts to build a methodology for the examination of myths as narratives, allowing the critic to discern what reasons for action and/or belief are held within these texts. By relying on narrative themes that not only explain the world, but also provide impetus for future human belief and action, the normative import of narratives can be discerned. Two mythic narratives enshrined in film are chosen to exemplify the heuristic value of this approach, the 1994 American filmic retelling of *Wyatt Earp* and a contemporary Indian film version of the Hindu Epic, the *Mahabharata* (entitled “*Mahabharat*”). By examining the ideal/implicit audience that these popular films project, one can use the insights of narrative theory to unearth the philosophical and normative themes within these mythic narratives that audiences reject, accept, or alter in future mythic discourse. This research continues the theoretical approach of Stroud (In Press), extending the comparative power of narrative theory by utilizing myths in the description of culture and cultural warrants for audience action/belief.

### The Jungian Approach to Myth

One powerful approach to myth has been the psychological perspective advanced by C. G. Jung. Before this particular theory and its adaptation to filmic myth is described, some notion of what a myth is must be provided. Multitudes of scholars have provided differing definitions of “myth,” all seemingly displaying what Brummett (1990) notes as a political orientation/motive behind such definitional moves. Both Rogerson (1984) and Kirk (1984) also notice this tendency, and warn against any proclamation of a single definition to myth. In terms of heuristic criticism, pluralism in method can be seen as a beneficial quality, especially in opening up new ways of viewing myths and the normative messages they convey to audiences (Osborn, 1990; Rushing, 1990; Solomon, 1990).

While this inquiry eschews the on-going definitional struggle between folkloric, archetypal, and general humanistic conceptions of myths, a tenable middle ground can be found that allows for powerful stories that help shape the beliefs/actions of societal members in the face of existential exigencies. Stroud (In Press) argues, “Myths use metaphor, image, and logic to argue for specific visions of the world, action, and the future of a particular tribe, race, society, etc.” Honko (1984) also sees such an important action guiding function in these powerful narratives, indicating “myths can be characterized as ontological: they are incorporated and integrated into a coherent view of the world, and they describe very important aspects of life and the universe” (p. 51). How one is to explain life and live it are imperative exigencies for each culture to work out; mythic narratives provide an important means through which cultures can undergo this proposal and alteration of answers to these basic questions (Campbell, 1986; 1988; 1990)—even though science challenges myth’s efficacy (Segal, 1996), the questions of life, death, morality, and value still remain important to the human confronted with the world. O’Flaherty (1988)

also conceives of myths as a sacred story that is important to a specific audience in that it addresses issues important to the audience's existence. Emphasizing the variety of responses that can be given to these existential exigencies, Doniger (1998) highlights that myth is a narrative "tool in the hands of human beings—and different human beings will not only use it in different ways, but define it in different ways" (p. 2). While such diverse responses have similarities, they often have real divergences both in substance and form (Doniger, 2000). It is on this contentious topic of comparing myths that the psychology of Jung is often brought to bear.

Before this study can offer a novel way to view myths as narratives, one contemporary approach of increasing popularity must be noted. The psychological theories of C. G. Jung have not only had a major impact in fields of psychology diametrically opposed to behaviorist models, but have held an impressive sway in the approach many humanistic scholars take toward myth (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, & Willingham, 1999). Jung (1958) conceives of archetypes as key elements to both psychology and mythology, since they "belong to the realm of the activities of the instincts and in that sense they represent inherited forms of psychic behavior" (p. xvi). Jung (1984) supports this point by gesturing to the uniqueness of these experiences in the individual psyche—one must conclude that these elements in dreams and stories are "independent of all tradition, and, consequently, that 'myth-forming' structural elements must be present in the unconscious psyche" (p. 247). It is this structural collection of archetypes, portrayed as psychic processes that span the human race, which is said to be analogous to basic physical traits spanning all humans. Dreams, fantasies, and myths that cannot be accounted for in experience or past events are instead seen as having their source in these archetypes, which are constitutive of the "collective unconscious," an assumed "collective psychic substratum" (Jung, 1984, p. 249) that all of humanity shares.

This theory is utilized by scholars in investigations of the psychological impact of myths, through such forms as fairy tales (von Franz, 1996) and film (Frentz & Rushing, 1993; Hill, 1992; Terrill, 2000). Of particular interest is the approach of Rushing and Frentz (1991; 1995), which uses a modified Jungian approach to discern the psychic state of a cultural audience. Through the postulation of a "cultural unconscious," Rushing and Frentz find an analyzable counter-part to the personal unconscious that serves as the source of archetypal symbols in popular media. Rejecting Jameson's (1981) notion of narratives as solely functioning to promote dominant ideologies and false consciousness, a more Jungian notion of narrative is advanced that focuses on the archetypal symbols that give a story its psychological power, and hence result in it being labeled as "mythic." These myths can be films, which in the case of Rushing and Frentz's (1991; 1995) research can help the critic discern the fears of society on a deep archetypal level, for instance, by scanning a text for its projections and "Shadow." An example of this would be modern films such as *E.T.* (Rushing, 1985) and *The Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Rushing & Frentz, 1995), which putatively display how American society is dealing with its shadow of technology and the fears over controls that accompany it. While these issues are not openly dealt with by the "cultural consciousness," the "cultural unconsciousness" does address them through artistic works such as filmic myths. This allows the critic to scan mythic texts and to observe the progress a given society is making toward "cultural individuation," which is the term Frentz and Rushing (1991) utilize in describing the postulated movement of a society in which oppression is diminished systemically and "the ego-consciousness of individuals would expand outward to encompass a social collectivity which includes others as part of the Self [a primary Jungian archetype]" (p. 394). This allows the critic to disclose the contents of a myth through reference to its archetypal symbols; this in turn can be used to diagnose the state of the collective psyche of that society and critique it as being a positive or negative step toward a hybrid notion of "cultural individuation." This diagnosis, like depth psychology, must at some stage refer to other texts—as Whitmont (1969) notes, dreams and myths rarely come in one discreet package. A heuristically valuable model of criticism is thus laid out using Jungian precepts to analyze the state of a given collective psyche.

While some have criticized such an approach (Dundes, 1996; Rowland, 1990a; 1990b; Wright, 2000), this inquiry does not wish to dispute its merits in proffering an interpretation of the psychological content of particular narratives. Spano (1999) and Radford and Wilson (1992) point out the risk that Jungian analysis holds in terms of reliance on archetypal lexicons—in the worst case, a critic could apply

archetypes and their interactional patterns in a formulaic manner. While the archetypal criticism mentioned above is modified and has produced intriguing readings of modern filmic myths, it does privilege the symbolic in determining its investigation and must by definition remain less sensitive to other elements (as any critical instrument does). Following Stroud (In Press), this inquiry takes heed of Doniger's (1998) distinction of the levels at which myths can be examined; there are

three levels of lenses in methods for the analysis of myths: the big view is the universalist view sought by Freud, Jung, Eliade; the middle view is the view of contextualized cultural studies, and the small view is the focus on individual insight. (p. 10)

The view taken by Rushing and Frentz can arguably be construed as overtly "universalist"—but to paraphrase Seinfeld, "not that there is anything wrong with that." This level is useful, but it looks for certain things in examining myths. Doniger (1996) highlights a tendency in "Jungians [to] argue that the basic theme was always available everywhere, like a kind of underground stream of story flowing everywhere on the planet . . . we're all hotwired for (or hardwired with) myths" (p. 113). Based on such universal assumptions as the "collective unconscious," such a view may find what it sets out to find in comparative situations between cultures—similarities. Also of value in comparative mythology, however, are the *differences* between myths and the grounds for action/belief that they provide; these are often vital elements in delineating a particular culture's value-based grounds for belief and action (Lincoln, 1996; Segal, 1984). In a world that is growing increasingly close, attention must be paid to important similarities *and* differences in cultural philosophies and normative guides (Mall, 2000).

What this study attempts to develop is a methodology and theoretical background from narrative theory for what Doniger denotes as the middle view of "contextualized cultural studies." While mining myths for archetypal messages and development is beneficial, it is also useful to exhume mythic texts for normative positions that they advance to a cultural audience. Rushing (1986) does draw upon Wilbur's (1983) notion of "surface structures" and "deep structures" in discussing mythic interpretation, but her inquiry eventually places more emphasis on the deeper levels of signification (especially in later projects). Rushing (1990) delineates two levels of mythic narrative, the "cultural myth" which "embod[ies] fundamental values that are widespread throughout the culture, or that impose the ideology of a privileged class upon under-classes" (p. 143), and "archetypal myth," which "expresses values that are universal to the human race" (p. 143). It is the former type of myth that this study wishes to explore further; while archetypal views of filmic myths have been explored, the view of myth as narrative holds much potential in terms of the guides for action and belief that cultural myths hold. In order to discern such philosophical positions in filmic myths and examine them in a comparative fashion, narrative theory must be used to ground a theoretical framework from which texts can be examined.

### Narrative Theory & Myth

Interesting research has been conducted concerning narrative in many fields (Carr, 1986; Martin, 1986), but this paper focuses on the work of Walter Fisher (1987) in his descriptions of the "narrative paradigm" of human communication. This vision of narrative is specifically focused on the uses of narrative in terms of social influence and audience evaluation—thus, it appears to be an excellent choice in building a methodology that reconstructs philosophical and normative positions that audiences can accept or reject from mythic narratives. Fisher attempts to illustrate the *mythos* in all communication, contra Plato, which must be present in order for any given audience to accept or reject any given message. Opposing views of logic that privilege linear syllogistic ways of arguing, Fisher (1984; 1985; 1989) instead supports a view of communication that finds narrative logic to be primary. Myths can and do contain powerful reasons for audience belief and action enshrined in narrative format.

Studies comparing the normative guides to action and belief in mythic narratives such as film can use the insights of narrative theory concerning popular narratives to discern whether such narratives will be accepted by a certain audience (which can be labeled the "inductive approach"), or alternatively, what message in such a narrative strikes such a resonance with a certain audience (which shall be called the "deductive approach"). Whereas the first approach can be used in examining the potential reception and effects of normative and philosophical guides in a mythic narrative, the later approach can be useful when a given narrative has mythic appeal (therefore widespread acceptance). Myths are those narratives that reach many individuals and are continually retold—if a myth does not meet the criteria of audience belief



and action, then it will not last long in terms of public circulation and acceptance. Fisher (1987) elucidates the criteria of audience reaction to a message, arguing that audiences judge a narrative and consequently accept or reject its reasons for action/belief based upon the two criteria of *narrative probability* and *narrative fidelity*. The deductive approach to analyzing mythic narratives can examine the story in terms of these two criteria; Fisher delineates narrative probability as

refer[ing] to formal features of a story conceived as a discrete sequence of thoughts and/or action in life or literature (any written or recorded form of discourse); that is, it concerns whether a story coheres or “hangs together,” whether or not a story is free of contradictions. (p. 88)

Fisher continues to argue that narrative fidelity, the external criteria of judgment, “concern[s] the ‘truth qualities’ of a story, the degree to which it accords with the logic of good reasons: the soundness of its reasoning and the value of its values” (p. 88). Furthermore, the analyzing of “whether or not the stories they [the audience] experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives” (p. 64) is a key part to an audience’s judgments of a story’s narrative fidelity. A narrative myth can be seen as containing powerful normative guides to action and belief if it fulfils these criteria—upon acceptance, an audience member is already accepting the themes/values in a particular narrative as reasonable guides *because* it is both coherent and resonant with their past experiences.

This conveyance of philosophical (i.e. ethical and epistemological) positions to an audience through a mythic narrative involves identification, not persuasion; Fisher points out

we *identify* with an account (and its author) or we treat it as mistaken. We identify with stories or accounts when we find that they offer “good reasons” for being accepted. . . . Reasons are good when they are perceived as (1) true to and consistent with what we think we know and what we value, (2) appropriate to whatever decision is pending, (3) promising in effects for ourselves and others, and (4) consistent with what we believe is an ideal basis for conduct. (p. 194)

What this inquiry proposes is that popular myths that are already seen as accepted by a particular society can be analyzed productively to discern what they say about the audience and what they are willing to accept. While actual empirical claims about a culture and its beliefs must be tempered by such an approach, communicative works always involve some sort of implied reader or listener (Iser, 1974; 1978). Fisher argues that narrative discourse specifically involves an *implied audience*, which aids in the process of identification noted previously. A mythic narrative privileges certain values, relationships, and themes in its plot, character, and actional sequences. All of these imply a certain audience that would accept them as good reasons for action and belief—if an audience disagrees with these values, they consequently disassociate themselves from this implied audience. For example, Fisher notes the Platonic text, *Gorgias*, as holding two implied audiences—an ideal one, supported by the narrative actions of the character Socrates, and the politically nefarious one, espoused by Calicles. The dialogue does privilege the Socratic conception in terms of its overt narrative moves qua dialogue—thus, it is reasonable to accept that the audience member who judges this narrative to be consonant/resonant with their views does so because they can identify with this implied audience. Conversely, if one does not accept the type of values that are in the text being offered to one who is concerned about issues of equality, politics, etc. (the implied audience), then this narrative shall most likely be judged as non-acceptable and as not holding good reasons for action or belief.

Thus, a method can be postulated as emergent from this narrative paradigm. Mythic narratives that show some significant amount of popularity or acceptance among a culture can be examined as holders of philosophical/normative guides to action and belief, at the very least in terms of the accepting audience they imply. It is this implied audience that an analysis of a mythic narrative can describe, and it is this conception that the text advances that will be identified with by an actual audience. O’Flaherty (1988) captures this two-pronged insight and the constant common ground of the implied audience when she points out, “It has often been asserted that our lives are models *for* myths . . . what is less obvious but equally true is that our lives are often models *of* myths. The myth supplies an ideal that may be fantastic, impossible to live out literally, but that is no less useful in the construction of our lives” (p. 155). The “target” or “ideal” that O’Flaherty refers to as being the message of myth is the implied audience—that hypothesized collection of values, the actions that they encourage, and the agent who would incorporate

such an outlook. It is this implied audience that the actual audience finds as narratively probable and as holding narrative fidelity in line with its desires and experiences.

In order to examine such narratives and construct the type of audience they imply, certain methodological steps can be provisionally enumerated. Initially, one may justify the comparative enterprise with the discussion of what Doniger (1998) calls the *micromyth*, which is a “neutral structure . . . a non-existent story with no point of view” (p. 88). This description of the micromyth at the heart of a particular narrative involves questions and issues that are common to all myths being compared in a given instance; additionally, details usually provided by adverbs and adjectives are omitted when a micromyth is put in simple sentential form. Indeed, Doniger calls for the micromyth to be generalized through simple noun-verb recreations that seek a common core. It is this common core that “makes it possible to find meaning shared by all the cultures that share the myth, meanings over and behind the cultural inflections” (Doniger, 1998, p. 91). While the procedure for generating such a myth is necessarily imprecise, focusing on the general occurrences in abstraction can provide the basis for the next stage of comparison.

Doniger (1998) also advances the notion of a *macromyth*, one that is “a composite of the details of many variants and insights; it arranges micromyths, in their possibly systematic relationships” (p. 93). This study wishes to decrease the scope of such macromyths to include the fleshed-out cultural inflection within a telling of a myth; this fills a putative lacuna in Doniger’s comparative theory through the insight that particular instantiations of cultural narratives (i.e., myths) will have particular and unique calls to action and belief. Thus, instead of compiling what can be labeled as macromyth<sub>1</sub>, this inquiry instead focuses on the level of macromyth<sub>2</sub>, which addresses the cultural details attached to the general micromyths. Thus, a critic can scan a mythic narrative for themes that are privileged in both the micromyth and the macromyth (hereafter used in the sense of “micromyth<sub>2</sub>”)—the former is beneficial for discerning what is common between two myths in terms of large questions/issues being addressed, and the later is helpful in reconstructing the specific projection of an implied audience, with whom the actual cultural audience may “resonate” with in a narrative fashion. To this extent, narrative theory can be used to describe the important issues and values that are being addressed in contemporary myths, many of which take the form of film and address key normative conflicts in society (Rushing & Frentz, 1978). Payne (1989) finds that filmic narratives “can speak to typical audience problems and situations, enjoining the viewer in a prescriptive rhetoric that shows how such problems ought or ought not be resolved, and how such situations can lead to success or failure for the character” (p. 29). By examining a popularly accepted mythic narrative in terms of its micromyth and macromyth, one can work in reverse from this formulation—how a particularly filmic myth is speaking to an audience qua implied audience can be thematically explored and reconstructed.

#### Comparative Mythic Analysis using a Narrative Foundation

In order to demonstrate the effectiveness of this method in examining mythic narrative for the values and warrants for action and belief they espouse, two remote cultural narratives will be explored. Both the American film, *Wyatt Earp* (1994), and the Indian film, *Mahabharat* (1976), detail specific cultural narratives that provide audiences with similar and different textual pushes for action and belief. *Wyatt Earp* details the exploits of the Earp family, culminating in their explosive gunfight at the “OK Corral” with factions of rustling families/groups. The *Mahabharat* tells the incredibly long story of the *Mahabharata*, a famed epic myth known throughout India recounting the battles of two rival groups of the Bharata family and the eventual conflict they are drawn into on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

The film *Wyatt Earp* details the much-recounted narrative of Wyatt Earp’s struggles against lawless elements in the “old west” (Kasdan & Kasdan, 1994). It is this story that not only draws on the myth of the frontier America (Tefertiller, 1997), but has spawned myriads of retellings of its own mythic story-line involving the exploits of Wyatt Earp—every retelling, be it in film or in book, expands on many of the known facts and often makes Wyatt Earp seem like a larger-than-life superhero (Marks, 1989). The film of *Wyatt Earp* begins by tracing Wyatt’s upbringing and his marriage to Urilla, which ends in her premature death (along with child) through Typhoid. Wyatt then brushes with the law, ending up as a reformed lawman in both Dodge City and in Tombstone. It is in the latter city that he and his brothers (Virgil and Morgan), while enforcing the town laws, are portrayed as planting the seeds of strife

between his entourage and the “cowboy” factions, most prominent of which are the McLaury’s and the Clantons. After several altercations and a general escalation of tensions, the two groups are brought to a violent gunfight, in which several members of the cowboy faction are killed and two members of Wyatt’s family are injured. In return for these slayings, Morgan Earp is latter assassinated and Virgil Earp is seriously wounded. Wyatt then leads a small posse of men, including his close friend and famous gambler/gunfighter, Doc Holiday, on a rampage, taking the lives of several known cowboys thought to be in on the Earp shootings. The film ends with Wyatt escaping harm and prosecution, and growing old in Alaska searching for gold.

The *Mahabharata* is an ancient epic narrative that many refer to as either myth or as itihasa, or traditional history. Like in the Wyatt Earp story, myth and reality converge at a powerful textual intersection that many in the Indian culture attend to. This story is quite important and most Indians recognize it in one of its many derivations/retellings (Minor, 1982; O’Flaherty, 1988). Katz (1990) provides an excellent gloss of the plot of the critical edition of the *Mahabharata*, from which the film *Mahabharat* differs in some respects. For the purposes of this study, it is the retelling of the myth in the form of the contemporary film that is of prime importance, as it is a modern version of the myth and the perceived important good reasons within its narrative. The film begins with the Kauravas (Duryodhana, Duhshasana, and others) and the Pandavas (Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva) being raised as a common family, although they are the sons of two brothers. Each group of cousins ends up receiving half the kingdom, holding an uneasy truce from the pings of jealousy (especially on the side of the Kauravas). After witnessing the miraculous prosperity and architecture the Pandavas brought to their kingdom (through the help of Visvakarman, a godly addition to the critical edition), the Kauravas (led by their eldest, Duryodhana) began to plot against their well-off kinsmen. The Pandavas are challenged to a game of dice, which is a particular weakness of Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas. Yudhishtira eventually loses everything to Duryodhana’s scheming uncle, Shakuni, including their kingdom, themselves, and their common wife, Draupadi, to the Kauravas. Draupadi is consequently humiliated in front of all the men when she is required to take her clothes off—she is spared disgrace through the godly intervention of Krishna, another later addition to the earlier script. They are granted a reprieve, but they are to spend thirteen years in exile and then return to claim their kingdom. After returning from exile, the Kauravas refuse to return the land promised to the Pandavas. Ready for war, Arjuna and Yudhishtira heed the council of Krishna, and seek peace with their kin. After negotiations fail, the Pandavas prepare for war. The Kurukshetra War begins, with devastating consequences for all. The Pandavas emerge victorious, but not without a massive loss of life. Duryodhana is slain at the hands of Bhima, and Yudhishtira rules unopposed.

### **Micromyth Extrapolation**

In order to discern what type of implied audience exists in these filmic myths with which an actual audience may identify, one must first extrapolate the micromyth at the core of both of these myths. This common basis allows for a basic similarity to facilitate comparison of the macromythic structure that each culture layers onto these myths. While the macromythic structure will be shown to provide the audience with warrants for belief or action concerning specific actions or themes, the micromyth provides the focus for the cultural superstructure—it is the schema of the myth that determines what issues can be raised and what questions can be given answers through this narrative framework.

In the case of *Wyatt Earp* and the *Mahabharat*, a common micromyth can be extracted. Following Doniger’s guide, one can refrain from coloring in the picture of each myth and instead construct a basic core myth within each story:

- 1) A family group/unit is wronged
- 2) Legal/official procedures to solve such a problem are not successful
- 3) Friends and family are called upon to assist in extra-legal measures, including violence,
- 4) Friends and family are injured or killed, leading to retributive killings
- 5) The wronged family group/unit regains its power/status

Stage 1 of the micromyth involves the Earp family in the *Wyatt Earp* film and the Pandavas in the *Mahabharat*; in the former, the Earps are not-heeded in terms of their vocations (lawmen) by the cowboy factions (the McLaury’s and the Clantons), and in the latter, the Pandavas are tricked into the loss of their



kingdom by the scheming Shakuni and the Kauravas. At stage 2, neither legal means (court, the deterrence of the law, etc.) can dissuade the cowboy factions in *Wyatt Earp*, nor can good faith negotiations end Duryodhana's jealousy and uphold the deal to restore the Pandavas' land after their dice-induced exile. Stage 3 has both groups of protagonists seeking out friends and allies to push resolution of the conflict through extraordinary measures; in the case of the Earps, some town support and the avid assistance of Doc Holliday are called upon, especially in the famous gunfight incident at the O.K. Corral. Also involved in this incident are the family members and allies of the rival faction, the cowboys. In the *Mahabharat*, Arjuna and his brothers seek assistance from their close friend, Krishna and other kings in their preparations for war at Kurukshetra. At stage 5, the spoils of the war/conflict lead to the killing and/or maiming of important characters on both sides. In the case of *Wyatt Earp*, Morgan, Virgil, and Doc are injured in the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, whereas important members of the Clanton/McLaury gang are killed. This group eventually kills Morgan Earp and severely wounds Virgil Earp, leading to a spate of retributive killings by Wyatt and friends (Doc included). In the *Mahabharat*, Arjuna's son Abhimanyu is killed by Drona and a variety of Kaurava allies, leading Arjuna to kill Jayadrath. He also slays Karna, and watches as Bhima kills Duryodhana as promised retribution for the humiliation of Draupadi. At stage 5, both wronged families gain back some sort of standing or normalcy—the Earps apparently lead a quiet, successful existence, as the film only leaves us with a free and unharmed Wyatt trying his fortunes out in the Alaska gold rush. The *Mahabharat* conflict ends with Yudhishtira being crowned as king of the land of Bharat, regaining the power and glory that was due to his family.

From this micromyth at the heart of these two westerns, one can notice how the implied audience constructed by these texts involves a focus on issues of power and revenge. Both of these points are connected to other key aspects both share—values such as noble violence in pursuit of vengeance, familial protection, and in the securing of family/group power are also key parts to this micromyth. Thus, the implied audience holds the characteristic that a focus on the gaining of power for a group/family is important, and that violence in pursuit of this control is justified. Both stories include elements of extra-legal, or in the case of the *Mahabharat*, adharmic (non-dutiful), actions involving the slaying of enemies in an attempt to right some wrong committed against the family of protagonists. For instance, Wyatt Earp and his friends slay a multitude of cowboys after his brothers are shot, even though there are warrants outstanding for his arrest. Arjuna, avenging the death of his son, Abhimanyu, tricks Jayadrath with the help of Krishna—the later uses his divine power to reverse the course of the sun, allowing Arjuna extra time to fulfill a promise to kill his opponent before nightfall. The implied audience that an actual audience would identify with in the cases of these two mythic narratives is one that holds family and revenge at obviously high levels—indeed, it is these two factors that impel the storylines of these two myths.

### **Macromyth Comparison**

The macromythic structure that each culture lays on top of the micromyth can now be examined. Due to space limitations, only two macromythic themes shall be considered in this inquiry. Suffice it to say that many other normative guides exist in popular mythic narratives such as *Wyatt Earp* and the *Mahabharat*. The culturally inflected themes of individual versus family and the nature of duty will be discussed in the following section. Examples from the films will be employed to support the following interpretation of the constructed implied audience that the films each offer to their culturally distinct actual audiences.

In terms of westerns, Wright (1975) and Klein (1992) both note the presence of binary oppositions, an important one being the tension between individual and community. In the case of the two filmic myths being examined, one can note telling ways that each cultural story falls to one side of this continuum or the other. In terms of *Wyatt Earp*, the tension between Wyatt qua individual and his family (the most immediate community) is weighted more toward Wyatt. In this film, Wyatt is the clear hero, with his family playing a supporting role. Even though Virgil is an elder brother, Wyatt is still recognized as the de facto leader—when the wives of his brothers try to convince him to stay in Dodge City, one tells him “They [his brothers] all listen to you, Wyatt. They’ll do what you say.” Even though Wyatt goes beyond the reaches of the law in his extra-judicial killings to avenge his family, he as an individual stands out as the leader and as the chief protagonist. In Dodge City, he is portrayed with

shotgun in hand, commanding the rogue cowboys to stop their violence—only after he makes his plea, do his brothers and friends enter to the sides of the group of cowboys to support him. At the climactic gunfight at the O.K. Corral, Wyatt sets the pace and course of the Earp's action, having a cup of coffee after his brothers inform him of the armed assailants gathering in the corral—all of this while his brother, Virgil, is the highest ranked peace officer (Marshal) among the three Earp brothers in the scene. Clearly, Wyatt is looked up to by his brothers and his authority is unchallenged by his family during the whole film. The implied audience is urged by this normative guide to be that individual, and is shown that while the family is important (Wyatt's father continually remarked, "nothing counts as much as blood. The rest are just strangers."), it is the strong individual who must lead at all times. The audience, like Wyatt, hopes for a commensurate display of valor in protecting his or her family, and in turn, wishes to remain untouched by the masses of bullets that Wyatt avoids throughout the entire film.

Contrasting to this emphasis on the strong individual within the family is the emphasis on the entire family as being composed of strong members in the *Mahabharat*. Rukmani (1992) points out that many of the moral dilemmas and important events in the *Mahabharata* storyline are spread out among all the Pandava brothers due to their fairly equal skill/strength and narrative importance. In this mythic narrative, the emphasis is on the family, not on one individual hero. For instance, when Arjuna brings his newly won wife, Draupadi, home, his mother (Kunti) unknowingly says, "share it [what you brought home] with your brothers." She is shocked when she finds out she just commanded that her five sons share one wife, but her word must be honored because it is the holy command of a parent. The merits and valor of the individual Arjuna are here minimized in light of his family. Another example from the *Mahabharat* that illustrates this point are the various wartime actions of his brothers—Bhima heroically slays Duhshasana and Duryodhana, fulfilling his vows to uphold the dignity of Draupadi; Yudhishtira is recognized as the leader of the Pandavas since he is the eldest; and the twins also take part in the command of armies. Unlike Wyatt Earp, Arjuna is not the standout hero—what seems to keep him separate from the rest of his brothers in the tradition is his close friendship with Krishna; as for his importance in this text, however, Arjuna seems just as heroic as the rest of his family—the implied audience is not presented with any textual pushes to be a strong individual over and above the family unit. Arjuna's strength is even minimized in the face of his family members on the Kaurava side; at the start of the war, Arjuna shoots a group of arrows into the air, spelling out "My obeisance to my elders" for the benefit of the revered Bhishma on the opposing side. Bhishma then signals back with his arrows, spelling out, "May victory be yours." The group is so emphasized by this narrative that the putative hero (Arjuna) signals his respect to the elders on the opposing side he is about to slaughter, and the grandsire and mighty warrior Bhishma minimizes his own prospects by wishing Arjuna victory. Contrast this to the Earps when walking down to their gunfight at the O.K. Corral; Morgan Earp tells Doc to "Let'em [the cowboys] have it" and then later yells to the cowboys, "You sons of bitches have been looking for a fight, now you can have it." The respect for elders and for a humbleness in the face of battle are gone in *Wyatt Earp*; in the *Mahabharat*, by contrast, the emphasis is on the family qua unit, even if that includes the other side in combat. Heroes are members of the family, not individuals like the one Wyatt portrays through his gallant gun-slinging abilities.

Another important theme that the audience is exposed to is the source of duty or ethical action. In regard to *Wyatt Earp*, Slotkin (1992) argues that the western film genre includes important ideological messages concerning ethics, one of which Coughlin (1998) identifies as its conception of law—positive law as the source of right is often enshrined within an individual, such as the town Marshall. In terms of *Wyatt Earp*'s narrative specifically, one sees the locus of duty in the law toward the beginning of the film, albeit a law that is instantiated and interpreted by the men empowered to enforce it. For instance, after Wyatt's wife dies and he is inconsolable for the first part of the film, he is arrested on the serious charge of horse theft. His father, a prominent lawyer, provides bail for his son and tells him to leave the state, because "if they try you, they'll hang you." Here the "law" of family love is put into play through an implement of positive law, a lawyer. Whereas Wyatt could have stood trial, his father instead forgoes the written law for this familial "interpretation" of whom the law is to punish, etc. This same type of thinking is embodied by Wyatt later in the film; when he is confronted with legal penalties due to his killing of violent cowboys who threaten his family, he states, "I won't let them [the cowboys] use the law to kill me

and my family . . . I won't allow that." Wyatt has become the interpreter of the law, and sees that it does not apply to people like him nor does it intend to harm such individuals. Therefore, the audience witnesses the strong hero character Wyatt refuse warrants out for his arrest until he is ready to go to trial; after his charges are dismissed, Wyatt's spate of revenge killings begin. The sanctioning warrant for these killings is contained within the theme of vengeance for harms against one's family—since the law cannot stop these dangerous elements by itself, the law personified in the form of the noble Wyatt must track the guilty parties down and kill them for their crimes. At some points, the film even questions this extremely subjective brand of justice—Doc states to Wyatt, "Maybe it's [the men they are following] just a pack of ordinary rustlers out about their business. Are you going to shoot all of them too?" While Doc's worry does not come true and Wyatt does kill the men he was looking for, it does emphasize the theme that is being constructed for the implied audience; Wyatt is on a justified course of revenge and slaughter only because those that have committed the crimes are escaping the grasps of the law sans honest lawmen. Wyatt, as the law and its sensibilities instantiated, pursues the guilty and metes out punishment. French (1997) also finds this theme in many westerns—the hero typically has the power of judge and jury over the guilty. In *Wyatt Earp*, the law is positivistic in character, i.e., it is established by the state to protect families and honest people, but is acceptably enforced and interpreted by such heroic men as the Earps (Wyatt in particular).

The implied audience of the *Mahabharat* receives a different message concerning the source of duty. Positive law, such as a king's codified or oral decree, is portrayed as equally helpful and hurtful in this story—for instance, Dhritarashtra both enables the trickery involved in the dice game with his commands and releases the Pandavas from their losses at that same game. Duryodhana, even though he has power to command, often leads his subordinates into adharmic or immoral actions, an example being the war at Kurukshetra that Drona and Bhishma both think is wrong. The true source of duty (dharma) and ethical conduct appears to be in some transcendent basis; whereas the laws of humans are arbitrary and changeable, the ultimate guide to conduct seems to be twofold. First, the goal of successful revenge deems all means necessary—the adharmic (non-dutiful) slaying of Duryodhana and Karna, and other instances of trickery by the supposedly good side (the Pandavas). This trickery is not only condoned, but also encouraged by the noble and wise consort Krishna as the only way to win (in the Duryodhana/Bhima fight) and as the only way to take part in the inevitable battle (his words to Arjuna before the Kurukshetra battle). The second source of duty beyond mere pragmatic considerations seems to be the transcendent will of Krishna. It is unclear whether Krishna qua deity commands fate or whether he is subject to fate; what is clear is that he encourages adharmic actions and he uses his divine powers to push the two parties along toward the cataclysmic battle. It is Krishna who saves Draupadi from humiliation at the dice game through a miracle (although this is a later Vaishnava addition to the critical edition). The winning and vengeance of the Pandavas is divinely willed, and as such Krishna attempts to felicitously accomplish this goal. Thus, to the implied audience, duty is intimately tied not only to issues of pragmatism but also to the higher goal of satisfying fate or a deity's command/will.

### Conclusion

This paper has attempted to elucidate a methodology grounded in narrative theory and contextualized mythology that is heuristically valuable in examining mythic narratives in a comparative fashion. While this has been an introductory inquiry into this line of research, some interesting insights have been gained by examining the popular filmic myths, *Wyatt Earp* and the *Mahabharat*, in terms of what type of audience they imply. This implied audience and its values are important because it is what an actual audience identifies with when they judge a narrative to be resonant with their experiences and values—in other words, it is this identification with the implied audience that leads a myth to be retold, remembered, and popular amongst a culture. Westerns, like myths in other cultures, are important in that they can tell one what that culture values and what it considers as guides to action and belief (Rushing, 1983). Matilal (1992) also finds that ancient Indian philosophical discussions about moral dilemmas and ethical issues were conducted not so much in discursive treatises, but largely in the ancient epics. While both of these narratives share a common micromyth of family revenge and regaining of power, the important cultural differences manifest themselves on the macromythical level. In terms of the level of individualism promoted and the foundation for duty, the films offer their implied audience radically

different readings. *Wyatt Earp* encourages protection of family through being a heroic individual above the other members of the family; also, law is seen as intending to protect such noble institutions as family, and as such may be liberally interpreted by heroic individuals if it is being misused by criminal elements. By contrast, the Pandavas in the *Mahabharat* are portrayed as being relatively equal in terms of heroism, and there is no one dominant leader present; law is given more of a transcendent grounding in either fate or a deity (Krishna). Thus, the identity of individuals presented through the Indian film is predominantly through familial belonging, whereas in *Wyatt Earp* family takes a secondary importance to the power and wisdom of the hero qua individual. An interesting foreshadowing of this finding is available in the titles of the films—one is a story that focuses on Wyatt Earp, the other focuses on the battle of the Bharata family. Law is positivistic in terms of grounding and individualized in terms of enforcement, whereas in the *Mahabharat* duty is not positivistic, but instead divinely sanctioned. It is through such narrative comparison that myths from different cultures, including contemporary filmic myths, can be examined in terms of the differing normative guides that they provide to their audiences through the constructed implied audience.



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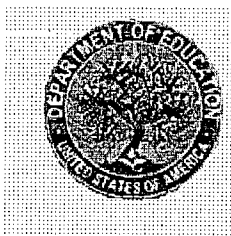
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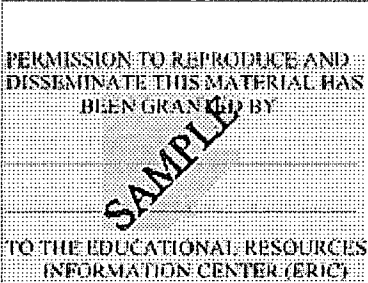
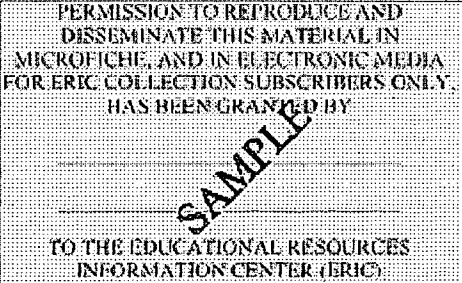
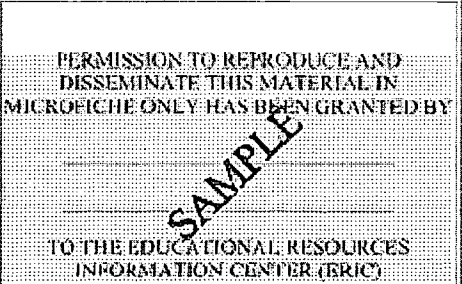
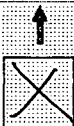
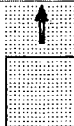
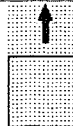
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